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### **Security Council Presidential Statement on Great Lakes Urges Concerted Efforts against Armed Groups' Illicit Funding from Pillaged Natural Resources**

Through a presidential statement, the Security Council urged signatory states of the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework for the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as well as regional organizations and the international community, to coordinate their efforts to undercut the economic lifelines of armed groups that benefit from the illegal exploitation and trade in natural resources, and to prevent the exploitation of women and children in the trade of these resources.

By the text (document [S/PRST/2021/19](#)), presented by Kenya, Council President for October, the 15-member organ stressed that there is no purely military solution to the threat posed by armed groups, and that their elimination will require an integrated and regional approach by Governments in the region, with the support of United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) and the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for the Great Lakes Region.

It condemned continued illicit exploitation of and trade by armed groups and criminal networks in natural resources in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo and the region, particularly in so-called “conflict-minerals” like tin, tantalum, gold and diamonds as well as cocoa, timber and wildlife. As well, it condemned the negative impact of armed conflict on protected natural areas, which undermines lasting peace and development for the Great Lakes Region. Further, it recalled that individuals and entities involved in destabilizing activities through the illicit exploitation or trade in natural resources in the Democratic Republic of the Congo may be designated by the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1533 (2004).

Huang Xia, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for the Great Lakes Region, presented the Secretary-General's latest biannual report on the implementation of the 2013 Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework for the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Region (document [S/2021/836](#)). He noted that, despite progress, challenges remained, including an upsurge in attacks by armed forces that were destabilizing the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of the

Congo. Such violence exacerbates the already fragile humanitarian situation, he said, adding that the armed groups are financed by the illegal exploitation and trade of natural resources.

Putting an end to the activities of these negative forces is “an old question that haunts everyone interested in the region”, he observed. However, despite such persisting challenges, countries in the region remain committed to peace and development, he said, highlighting a workshop recently co-organized by his Office in Khartoum, which helped generate 31 recommendations “both ambitious and realistic” geared towards ending the link between the smuggling of some high-value minerals and the financing of armed groups.

Martha Ama Akyaa Pobee, Assistant Secretary–General for Africa, Departments of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Peace Operations, while shedding light on the deteriorating humanitarian situation and the heavy toll on civilians, particularly women and children, also spotlighted the commitment by the authorities of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to provide adequate resources for the disarmament, demobilization, community recovery and stabilization programme that was recently established. Success of this national programme will contribute tremendously to sustainable peace and security in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, she said, calling on international partners and donors to also support these efforts.

João Samuel Caholo, Executive Secretary of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, pointed out that peacekeeping missions in the region have a fundamental role in reducing the criminal exploitation of natural resources and contributing to stability and economic recovery. Such missions, he said, should participate in joint security efforts to dislodge rebel and militia groups from mining sites where armed groups use such revenues to finance conflict, and entrust those sites to Government institutions, rather than national security forces.

Speakers throughout the meeting expressed concern over an upsurge in violent attacks in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Many emphasized the need to tackle the root causes behind the conflict — the illegal exploitation and trade of natural resources — which fuels the activities of armed groups, thereby destabilizing the region and worsening the humanitarian situations.

Tunisia’s representative, who was one among many voicing such concerns, stressed that the region’s wealth should become the driver of development, not a source of funding for the armed groups.

Meanwhile, the representative of France underscored the need for tighter regulation and monitoring of the exploitation of gold, stating that the Security Council should sanction individuals and entities involved in the exploitation of natural resources.

In a similar vein, Colm Brophy, Minister for Overseas Development and Diaspora of Ireland, pointed out that “competition for control of resource-rich areas fuels hostilities and violence.” Such challenges were further exacerbated by climate change, population displacement, extreme poverty, socioeconomic inequality and a lack of opportunities for young people.

Téte António, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Angola, noting that his country assumed the Presidency of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region in November 2020, drew attention to the high-level diplomatic initiatives to strengthen cooperation in security matters. A Contact and Coordination Group has been established by Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, the United Republic of Tanzania and Uganda with the task of coordinating the implementation of non-military measures to complement military operations against negative forces in the region, he said.

Niger’s representative, along with other delegates, commended the increase in diplomatic efforts among leaders in the Great Lakes region to address issues ranging from the exploitation of natural resources to the flow of refugees. Encouraging the Central African Republic to increase the transparency of its disarmament, demobilization, reintegration and rehabilitation plans, he applauded the recent ceasefire declaration, calling it “an act of political courage”.

The representative of Burundi, for his part, commended all the efforts that resulted in the removal of his country from the Council’s agenda, stating that his Government, elected in 2020, has devised a National Development Plan focussing on good governance, economic growth, social protection and national reconciliation. However, economic development in the region is hobbled by a lack of funding, which if unaddressed may in turn undermine peace efforts, given the negative impact of climate change on development, he said.

Claude Ibalanky Ekolomba, High Representative of the President and Coordinator of the National Monitoring Mechanism of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, outlined steps his Government has taken to stabilize the conflict in the eastern provinces to better implement its commitments under the Framework Agreement. The state of siege imposed in Ituri and North Kivu earlier this year enabled progress in stabilizing the region, including the dismantling of networks that resupply the groups, and the release of hostages, among others.

He urged countries in the region and the international community to adhere to the Framework Agreement in order to tackle the root causes of conflict, including through the combat of illegal exploitation of natural resources and arms trafficking. Towards that end, President Félix Tshisekedi Tshilombo has forged economic cooperation with Uganda, Burundi and Rwanda, he pointed out, adding that he hoped the upcoming meeting of the Regional Oversight Mechanism on 8 December in Kinshasa will not be an “empty ceremony”, but will instead lend new momentum to the Agreement and spur participants to adhere to their commitments.

Also speaking today were ministers, senior officials and representatives of Kenya, Norway, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Mexico, Estonia, Russian Federation, Viet Nam, the United States, India, the United Kingdom, China, Uganda and Rwanda.

The meeting began at 10:09 a.m. and ended at 1:25 p.m.

### Briefing

HUANG XIA, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for the Great Lakes Region, presented the biannual report on the Implementation of the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework for the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Region (document [S/2021/836](#)), covering the period from 16 March to 15 September. Recalling that the countries of the region remain committed to peace and development and look to the international community to support their efforts, he said the report takes into account both the progress made and the challenges that persist.

He welcomed the continuing political dialogue between countries of the region, noting that the increase in State visits have spurred bilateral relations and revitalized cooperation in realms including security, trade, infrastructure, transport, natural resources and energy. He highlighted encouraging political and symbolic gestures, including meetings between the President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and his counterparts from Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda, as well as the continued commitment of the President of Angola — the current Chairman of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region — to support national reconciliation efforts in the Central African Republic.

He also welcomed the peaceful elections in Zambia and the subsequent smooth transfer of power, as well as Kenya's contribution of troops to the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) to help defeat armed forces rampant in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. As part of these efforts, the launch of the Contact and Coordination Group aims to incentivize the surrender and voluntary disarmament of armed groups, he said, adding that such measures will complement the efforts led by the Democratic Republic of the Congo through its Disarmament, Demobilization, Community Recovery and Stabilization Program.

Despite such progress, challenges remain, he noted. There has been an upsurge in attacks by armed forces, including those destabilizing eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Résistance pour un État de droit au Burundi (RED Tabara), which attacked the Bujumbura airport last September. Such violence exacerbates the already fragile humanitarian situation and affects socioeconomic stability, he said, adding that the armed groups are financed by the illegal exploitation and trade of natural resources. Ending these negative forces is “an old question that haunts everyone interested in the region”, he commented, spotlighting the workshop on natural resources in Khartoum from 31 August to 2 September that his Office co-organized. This event helped generate

31 recommendations “both ambitious and realistic” which aims to put an end to the link between the smuggling of some high-value minerals and the financing of armed groups. In addition, his Office and the Conference will work to sensitize countries of transit and destination of such minerals to support efforts to bring such activities to a halt.

Turning to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has compounded the region’s prevailing socioeconomic fragilities, he underlined the low rate of vaccines administered in the region and reiterated the Secretary-General’s call for greater solidarity with developing countries. His Office developed an inclusive action plan last July aimed at facilitating vaccine access and bolstering existing health systems. He reiterated his commitment to working with relevant United Nations bodies in the region, as well as with the Peacebuilding Fund, to ensure the plan’s full implementation, and called on the Council and the international community for their support.

Such positive developments in the region can be attributed to initiatives aiming to fulfil objectives designated through the 2006 International Conference on the Great Lakes Region Framework Agreement, he said, underlining the importance of countries in the region implementing recently signed bilateral agreements and commitments made through regional and international instruments. In this context, he welcomed upcoming summit meetings including the tenth Regional Oversight Mechanism summit in Kinshasa in December.

JOÃO SAMUEL CAHOLO, Executive Secretary of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, said that the Conference has made progress in peace, stability and development despite the heinous criminal activity in the region, including the illegal exploitation and trade of natural resources and increased sexual violence by armed groups. The Conference’s recent meetings — including that on the security and political crisis in the Central African Republic — demonstrate that it has become a regional platform to address inter-State tensions. The Conference’s commitment to deepen and consolidate democracy in the region is further evidenced by “the organization of peaceful and credible elections in Burundi, Uganda, Tanzania, Congo and Zambia”, as well as increased participation by women in decision-making bodies, he said.

Turning to peacekeeping missions in the region, he said that such missions play a fundamental role in reducing the criminal exploitation of natural resources; contributing to stability and economic recovery; and enhancing the technical capacity of national authorities and local security forces in their management of local resources. Peacekeeping missions should participate in joint security efforts to dislodge rebel and militia groups from mining sites where armed groups use such revenues to finance conflict. Those sites should be placed in the hands of Government institutions, rather than national security forces. He also stressed that the international community must play a role in strengthening cross-border security and combatting transborder crime and terrorism. For its part, the Conference is working to establish an early warning system for the region to share information in real time.

On disarmament, demobilization, reintegration and rehabilitation plans, he called on the international community to provide technical and financial support for such efforts — including intensive peace education and economic empowerment for ex-combatants — as these initiatives depend on reliable funding streams. These programs must ensure that targeted communities benefit from them, he stressed, adding that they should be linked to broader national reform. Though costly, they have had positive effects on building social cohesion in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Burundi and the Central African Republic. Even more could be achieved in the Great Lakes region, he noted, if the sharing of information and coordination between borders is enhanced. He also called on all stakeholders to help attract investment in the region, design programs to create youth employment and support the Conference’s mineral-due-diligence efforts.

MARTHA AMA AKYAA POBEE, Assistant Secretary-General for Africa, Departments of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Peace Operations, said that the persistent insecurity in the Democratic Republic of the Congo east remains one of the main challenges facing the region today. National and foreign armed groups continuing to perpetrate deadly attacks against civilians, further deteriorating the already dire humanitarian situation. Since the beginning of this year, at least 1,043 civilians have been killed, including 233 women and 52 children. This in turn shed light on underlying causes of the conflicts in the region, including, among others, the presence of foreign armed groups, the illegal exploitation of natural resources, intercommunal tensions, limited State presence in remote areas, marginalization and exclusion, youth unemployment and poverty.

Governments of the region continue to prioritize military operations as part of their efforts to address the threat posed by armed groups in eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, she continued. She commended President [Félix Antoine] Tshisekedi Tshilombo’s decision to establish an operational centre in Goma to enhance cooperation between MONUSCO and the FARDC in the conduct of intelligence-driven operations against armed groups in Ituri and North Kivu provinces. These military operations should be conducted in strict compliance with the human rights due diligence policy. However, all initiatives must translate into actions. In that regard, she welcomed the adoption of a three-year action plan of the Contact and Coordination Group aimed at neutralizing the “negative forces” through a non-military approach. MONUSCO and the Office of the Special Envoy will continue to support this Group through the establishment of an operational unit to be hosted in Goma.

She also commended the authorities of the Democratic Republic of the Congo for their commitment to provide adequate resources for the disarmament, demobilization, community recovery and stabilization programme that was recently established. Success of this national programme will contribute tremendously to sustainable peace and security in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, she said, calling on international partners and donors to also support these efforts. Among the main root causes of conflict are the illegal exploitation and regional trafficking of natural resources, which not only contribute to finance armed group networks but also creates

parallel economy at the expense of States' revenues. The path towards sustainable peace and development also requires the meaningful participation of women, youth and the private sector.

MONUSCO and the Office of the Special Envoy will continue to ensure the participation of women and youth in local political and peace processes and work with the United Nations country team to support peacebuilding and stabilization efforts within the framework of the peace-development-humanitarian nexus.

### Statements

RAYCHELLE OMAMO, Cabinet Secretary for Foreign Affairs of Kenya and Council President for October, spoke in her national capacity, observing that few parts of the world exemplify the notion of “paradox” than Africa's Great Lakes region. Home to the second largest rainforest and a critical lung for the planet, the region is the catchment area for Africa's largest rivers and lakes and a habitat of impressive biodiversity. As well, the Great Lakes region is endowed with a vast and unmatched array of precious and rare minerals as well as a rich pool of oil reserves and other hydrocarbons. However, a great disconnect exists between the region's potentials and the reality of pervasive poverty, underdevelopment and instability that has plagued this area for centuries. This is due, in part, to an incessant cycle of brutal extraction, illicit exploitation, pillage and trafficking of the region's natural resources.

“We are here today to reinvigorate and renew the Council's commitment to support the regional Governments,” she stated. Proposing five courses of action, she said that first, capacity-building and other assistance must be provided to resource-endowed countries to enable the development and implementation of policies, strategies and mechanisms for managing natural resources. Second, enhanced support should be provided to national security and law enforcement agencies for improved security around the mining regions, transit routes and border areas. Third, platforms for inclusive dialogue must be created to rebuild trust and confidence between mining communities, local authorities, extraction entities and merchants. Fourth, regional countries should work together to deploy a range of military and non-military options to deal with armed groups. The non-military measures may include disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration programmes for the ex-combatants. Fifth, she called for greater regional cooperation to deepen the economic integration of the affected countries with a special focus on the productive utilization of national resources.

COLM BROPHY, Minister for Overseas Development and Diaspora of Ireland, recognizing progress in the region, underlined the centrality of the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework and expressed hope that the upcoming meeting of its oversight mechanism will help maintain the current momentum. He also welcomed the United Nations Strategy for Peace Consolidation, Conflict Prevention, and Conflict Resolution. However, he noted his concerns over the illegal exploitation and trade of minerals and natural in the region. “Competition for control of resource-

rich areas fuels hostilities and violence,” he said, adding that climate change, population displacement, extreme poverty, socioeconomic inequality and the lack of opportunities for young people are also exacerbating challenges. Calling for good governance approaches and cooperation, he said Ireland will continue supporting the Kimberley Process Certification scheme and implementing the European Union’s Conflict Minerals Regulation, among others. Action is also needed to address the region’s humanitarian and displacement crises, he said, also urging all parties to ensure the safety and security of humanitarian personnel and unhindered access to humanitarian assistance.

NICOLAS DE RIVIÈRE (France) emphasized that enhanced regional cooperation must translate into specific action for the protection of civilians in the Great Lakes region, including humanitarian actors that are still victimized by armed groups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It is also important to ensure coordination among security actors on the ground and with MONUSCO. Further, he stressed the need to contain the illegal exploitation of natural resources — a main cause of instability — as this helps finance armed groups and criminal networks, feeds conflict and compounds tensions between States. Gold exploitation, in particular, is not sufficiently monitored and must be more tightly regulated. To that end, the Council must sanction individuals and entities involved in natural resource exploitation. He also stressed that, as MONUSCO transitions, United Nations agencies should enhance their presence in the Great Lakes region, and donors should mobilize to support implementation of the United Nations regional strategy and to meet humanitarian needs.

MONA JUUL (Norway) noted the positive advances in cooperation in the Great Lakes region, including on action against armed groups in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. It is vital that the United Nations and the global community support those efforts, she stressed, adding that the adoption of the Strategy for the Great Lakes Region and its accompanying Action Plan are a good starting point. However, the illicit trade of natural resources in the region, which generates hundreds of millions of dollars annually, is a root driver of conflict, draining public revenue and seriously impacting States’ ability to protect and provide for their populations. She expressed hope that the endorsement of the recommendations by Heads of State at the upcoming International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, together with existing mechanisms, can contribute to curbing revenue streams to armed groups and advancing the transparent and sustainable management of natural resources in the region.

INGA RHONDA KING (Saint Vincent and the Grenadines) urged that continued efforts ensure women’s full, equal, and meaningful participation in all stages of the political, peace and development processes. Expressing concern over the volatile security situation in the region, including the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the Central African Republic, she welcomed President [Faustin-Archange] Touadera's unilateral declaration of a ceasefire as a fundamental step towards the implementation of the Peace Agreement and called on all parties to



follow suit. Highlighting the humanitarian situation across the region, she pointed to a significant number of internally displaced people, with many experiencing food insecurity. She called for sustained support, including through contributions to the relevant humanitarian response plans. Voicing her hope regarding the United Nations Strategy for Peace Consolidation, Conflict Prevention and Conflict Resolution in the Great Lakes Region, she also urged States to address the root causes and drivers of endemic violence, particularly the illegal exploitation and trade of natural resources.

JUAN RAMÓN DE LA FUENTE RAMIREZ (Mexico) welcomed the achievements of regional diplomacy, including the normalization of relations between Burundi and Rwanda, and the strengthening of ties between the latter country and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. While underscoring the positive effects these regional dynamics have had on peace and security — including the revitalization of the political agreement in the Central African Republic — he pointed out that significant challenges remain; those are a result of the actions by armed groups that produce security issues and hinder the provision of humanitarian assistance. Tackling the root causes of violence must be a priority and robust action must be taken to address the exploitation and trafficking of natural resources. Further, he stressed that more specific efforts must be implemented to combat the illicit transfer of small arms and light weapons, adding that policies to manage arms and munitions must complement the broader strategy of disarmament and demobilization.

TAREK LADEB (Tunisia) noted that the region is witnessing political, economic and security challenges, which are being exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Noting that the pillaging of natural resources finances the activities of armed groups, he stressed that the region's wealth must become the driver of development, not a source of funding for the armed groups.

Emphasizing the importance of full implementation of the regional peace and security framework, he welcomed the regional summit of Heads of State held in Uganda in September as an opportunity to pull their efforts together. Paying tribute to the work of the Special Envoy, including his good Offices and assistance in capacity-building, he also underscored the long-term value of the United Nations Strategy for Peace Consolidation, Conflict Prevention and Conflict Resolution for the Great Lakes region. He lauded the Peacebuilding Commission and the Peacebuilding Fund, reaffirmed support for regional organizations, including the African Union, the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region and the East African Community, and endorsed the Presidential Statement adopted today.

SVEN JÜRGENSON (Estonia) said the insecurity over two decades in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo destabilizes the region, leading to day-to-day killings of civilians, as well as conflict-related sexual violence, “behaviour unworthy of human beings”. The conflict in the region has plunged the population in a dire humanitarian situation and has left them experiencing critical levels of food security. “It is inconceivable that about 15 million people in the region are subjected to forced displacement,” he stressed, adding, that this should not happen to populations in these times. He underlined the importance of greater regional cooperation to consolidate control over

conflict minerals and mining sites and welcomed efforts towards regional cooperation and dialogue by countries in the region in this regard. He encouraged the implementation of regional databases on mineral flows as well as the harmonization of regional regulations. He also called for the strengthening of the national disarmament, demobilization and stabilization programme, spotlighting the role of investigative authorities and regional courts in addressing accountability for illegal exploitation of natural resources.

ANNA M. EVSTIGNEEVA (Russian Federation) said the situation in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo remains challenging, observing that while the situation in Tanganyika Province has been stabilized, armed groups such as the Allied Democratic Forces continue to be active in North Kivu. More is needed to be done to ensure the extraction of minerals takes place in an orderly manner. She also noted that exclusively military means will not bring about lasting normalization of the situation in the region. She took note of positive steps taken by the Democratic Republic of the Congo to resolve border disputes, and to implement disarmament, demobilization, repatriation and reintegration programmes for former combatants. She also welcomed heightened diplomacy efforts by countries in the region and commended the role played by the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region under the presidency of Angola in supporting such efforts. The successes underscored her country's conviction that African problems must be addressed by African solutions, she stressed, adding that it is nefarious to try to impose ready-made formulas or interfere from the outside.

ABDOU ABARRY (Niger) welcomed the recent increase in diplomatic efforts among leaders in the Great Lakes region to address issues such as the exploitation of natural resources and the flow of refugees. Encouraging the Central African Republic to increase the transparency of its disarmament, demobilization, reintegration and rehabilitation plans, he called the recent ceasefire declaration "an act of political courage". Condemning armed groups' attacks in that country, as well as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, he welcomed regional efforts to end this violence. Military action cannot be ruled out to resolve insecurity in the region; however, non-military measures designed to address the drivers of conflict will help consolidate peace. In this quest for peace in a region so vast and rich in natural resources, it is necessary to strengthen bilateral ties among countries in the region and ensure synergy between the various subregional organizations to which those States belong, he stressed.

HAI ANH PHAM (Viet Nam), emphasizing the vital importance of regional cooperation in conflict prevention and resolution, said it also plays a central role in tackling the illegal activities of armed groups, the illicit exploitation of and trade in natural resources and the adverse impacts of natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic. Commending progress on regional cooperation in the Great Lakes region, he nevertheless said the humanitarian situation remains worrisome, especially in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. While welcoming the gradual return of refugees in Burundi, he expressed concern over the plight of millions of displaced people and

refugees, as well as the more than 27 million people in the Democratic Republic of the Congo that face crisis-level food insecurity. In that context, he encouraged the further intensification of cooperation to implement the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework, to strengthen management of nature resources and to tackle threats posed by armed groups.

LINDA THOMAS-GREENFIELD (United States) expressed support for the principles of the United Nations Peace Consolidation, Conflict Prevention and Conflict Resolution in the Great Lakes region and encouraged the Special Envoy to swiftly implement it through shuttle diplomacy. She also welcomed the work towards establishing a regional oversight mechanism and Kenya's focus on natural resources, adding that, as noted in the meeting, the illegal trade of natural resources is clearly fuelling violence in the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Urging Governments in the region to uphold their commitments, she called for responsible management of natural resources, including due diligence for the private sector. If regional State actors work together to carry out legal trade of natural resources, the difference will be extraordinary, she said.

T. S. TIRUMURTI (India) said armed groups remain the main cause for insecurity in many countries of the region. As well, the porous international borders remain a major impediment in combating these groups, he said, welcoming high-level regional diplomacy and the reinvigoration of the bilateral mechanisms to strengthen border control, sharing of information and intelligence and border infrastructure development. The illegal exploitation, trafficking and illicit trade of natural resources have contributed to armed conflict in the region; existing systems and efforts at the regional level need be strengthened further to address the issue. India has close bilateral relationships with all countries in the Great Lakes region. A key driver of these relationships is the people-to-people contact that has existed for many years, he said, drawing attention to a large Indian diaspora in the region. India has collaborated through exchange of experts, training and capacity building programs and enhanced support towards post-conflict reconstruction in the region, he noted.

JAMES KARIUKI (United Kingdom) said the concept note for today's meeting rightly identified the illegal exploitation and trade in natural resources as a key conflict driver and multiplier of destabilising forces. He called on regional Governments to play their part by ramping up national efforts to tackle corruption and improve the rule of law and domestic taxation. Expressing deep concern that the United Nations Group of Experts for the Democratic Republic of the Congo has been on hold since August, he said that this has prevented the Group from providing their concrete and actionable reporting on illicit smuggling of natural resources in the region. While continuing to focus on natural resource exploitation, it is important to discuss and address other priority areas including but not limited to human rights, good governance, freedom of expression and civil liberties in the Great Lakes, he said.

ZHANG JUN (China), stressed that peace and development in the region faces a window of opportunity. Emphasizing the need to maintain the momentum of cooperation, he called on States to

adhere to eliminate the root causes of conflicts. The competition over natural resources was due to poverty and underdevelopment, he said, underscoring that countries in the region should strictly regulate and enforce the exploitation and utilization of natural resources; strengthen regional cooperation to combat their illegal exploitation and trade; and cut off the channels of illegal profits for armed groups. He also pointed out that the COVID-19 vaccination rate in the region is only 6 per cent and cited the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimate that it will be difficult for countries in the region to return their per capita income to the pre-pandemic levels before 2025. Calling for increased vaccine assistance to the region and pragmatic measures in debt relief and development assistance to help with pandemic response and recovery, he noted that 12 countries in the region are using Chinese vaccines.

TÉTE ANTÓNIO, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Angola, recalled that his country assumed the Presidency of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region in November 2020, with an aim to enhance the Conference's capacity to address the challenges of peace, security, stability, and development in the region, with the support of partners including the African Union, the European Union and the United Nations. Despite the achievements under the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework Agreement, the illicit exploitation of natural resources, tense relations between countries, refugees and internally displaced persons, humanitarian issues and growing terrorist threats continue to threaten the stability of the region. As such, preventive diplomacy, sustainable development through the promotion of investments and increased participation of international financial institutions and the private sector are needed.

He went on to say that as part of the high-level diplomatic initiatives to strengthen cooperation in security matters, a Contact and Coordination Group has been established by Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, the United Republic of Tanzania and Uganda with the task of coordinating the implementation of non-military measures to complement military operations against negative forces in the region. However, the illicit exploitation and trade of natural resources is one of the key drivers of instability. It is therefore of fundamental importance that the nexus between natural resources and conflicts must be brought to bear in the formulation of adequate responses and mitigation measures, he said.

CLAUDE IBALANKY EKOLOMBA, High Representative of the President and Coordinator of the National Monitoring Mechanism of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, said that despite formidable challenges, his country is determined to implement all its commitments under the Peace, Security, and Cooperation Framework Agreement. Recalling that President Félix Tshisekedi Tshilombo imposed a state of siege in Ituri and North Kivu earlier this year to counter the activities of armed groups, he outlined progress, including the neutralization of hundreds of militia members, the recovery of munitions, the dismantling of networks that resupply the groups, the release of hostages, a decrease in raids on civilians and the reopening of some roads previously under armed groups' control. Pointing out that a combination of military and non-military solutions is required to

bring the situation under control, he called on the Security Council to express its support for the siege as well as other programmes his Government is undertaking, including disarmament, demobilization, repatriation and reintegration programmes.

Consolidating peace in the region entails tackling the root causes of destabilization, including through the combat of illegal exploitation of natural resources and arms trafficking, he continued. In this regard, he called on countries in the region and the international community to adhere to the Framework Agreement, adding that President Tshekedi has forged economic cooperation with Uganda, Burundi and Rwanda. The state of gridlock around the security situation must be overcome to achieve technical reforms laid out in the Framework, he stressed. To this end, the National Monitoring Network has outlined a roadmap, which focusses on identifying and tackle the root causes of conflict, strengthening capacities at all levels, supporting national cohesion and strengthening national and regional cooperation. He expressed his hope that the upcoming meeting of the Regional Oversight Mechanism on 8 December in Kinshasa will not be an “empty ceremony”, but will instead lend new momentum to the Agreement and spur participants to adhere to their commitments.

ADONIA AYEBARE (Uganda) highlighted the region’s renewed sense of optimism in improved bilateral relations between the Democratic Republic of the Congo and its neighbours — with a specific focus on addressing the root causes and drivers of conflict and instability. Welcoming renewed cooperation between the countries, he said relations between Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo are excellent. Another example of enhanced cooperation was the mini-summit in October 2020 of the Heads of States of Uganda, Rwanda, Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Heads of State agreed to strengthen surveillance and control measures in response to COVID-19 and other pathologies with epidemic potential; combine their efforts to eradicate the negative forces and armed groups; work together to stop the illicit exploitation and trade of natural resources; and consolidate cooperation to create economic opportunities, in particular trade facilitation and cross-border infrastructure.

The United Nations and the Security Council must recognize the critical role played by regional mechanisms as building blocks in the promotion of peace, security and stability in the region, he continued. Under the auspices of the East African Community, his country — working together with Kenya, United Republic of Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan, and soon with the Democratic Republic of the Congo — is “razor-focused” on improving the physical infrastructure in the region, thus greatly enhancing economic integration. The United Nations and the African Union, as key guarantors of the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework Agreement for the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the region, have a unique role to play in enhancing their efforts to support the countries in the region, he said.

ZÉPHYRIN MANIRATANGA (Burundi) commending all the efforts that resulted in the withdrawal of Burundi from the Security Council's agenda, informed the 15-member organ that his country has restored peace and security and the Government, having come out of the elections in 2020, has put together a national programme towards building social stability and economic growth. The National Development Plan of 2018–2027 is centred on several pillars, including good governance, economic growth, youth employment, social protection, and peace and national reconciliation. However, one of the issues in the region is a lack of funding needed to support economic development.

Highlighting the clear link between peace and development, he said the negative impact of climate change on development could in turn undermine peace efforts. Therefore, it is imperative to focus on mobilizing funding, he said, welcoming efforts by the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region. He went on to congratulate the Special Envoy for his efforts towards lasting peace in the region and on his inclusive and participatory approach to elaborate the regional strategy and action plan. He added that he hopes to see the international community support the Special Envoy in implementing the strategy.

VALENTINE RUGWABIZA (Rwanda) welcomed today's debate, which is occurring at a time when the countries of the Great Lakes region are facing the full-blown socioeconomic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite these circumstances, foreign and domestic negative forces continue to operate in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Rwanda has faced several cross-border attacks from such forces — the latest of which occurred on 27 August. She stressed that illegal trade in arms and natural resources allow these negative forces to continue to organize, recruit new combatants and obtain new equipment.

For the Great Lakes region to unleash its full potential for development and prosperity, the armed groups and negative forces operating in the region must be neutralized and the materiel supply networks that fuel them must be cut, she said. Further, increased cooperation on security and development between Member States of the Great Lakes region will make an immense contribution in this regard. “The good news is that this is happening,” she pointed out. Noting that cross-border trade and investment promotes confidence-building and peace, she spotlighted the upcoming Great Lakes Investment and Trade Conference, which Rwanda will host in November.

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